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Want to Experience a *Real Working Vacation*?

For the horseback experience of a lifetime, join the Skelton family as they tend to their Montana ranch.

Article and Photographs by Fran Devereux Smith



The chance to move cattle across open range is a big attraction for those who want to experience a working-ranch vacation.

“This isn’t some fluffy *el grande rancho*,” says Steve Skelton, who with wife Alison, daughter Cassy and son Matt, owns and operates Skelton Angus Ranch and SK Ranch Vacations north of Choteau, near Bynum, in northern Montana. “It’s a working family ranch, complete with family values, and what we offer is real ranching.”

“Because we keep the numbers small, our guests really ‘hook’ into our family and neighbors. Guests seem to want that personal experience.”

And a visit to the Skelton Ranch is just that—a personal experience. Guests won’t find polite conversation with a bunch of strangers in a large dining hall, but instead enjoy the camaraderie found around the Skeltons’ kitchen table, where guests, family and neighbors gather when the day’s work is done.

Granted, the privacy of a guest cabin is only a short distance from the ranch house, and guests don’t really have to work.

“But they can participate as much as they like,” Steve explains. “We’ll be glad to show them anything that we know how to do, that they’re willing to learn. Most people’s skill levels won’t grow quickly enough in a few days to rope a cow, but they can rope dummies and come along when there’s roping to be done.”

“Some people want to try and do everything on the ranch,” Alison adds, “but most just want the open-range riding, to gather cattle or even to work on their horsemanship. So, this guest business is just a natural offspring of who we are and what we do.”

The Skeltons are native Montanans, who met when Steve, who’d been outfitting in the mountains for a year, visited the veterinary clinic where Alison worked. Now married for almost 20 years, they’re well-suited for ranch life. Steve knows horses and cattle, and what works well on an open-range outfit. A self-professed homemaker, Alison likes nothing better than feeding the sometimes veritable army

of family, friends and guests at her table. But she can also do everything from work cattle to drive heavy equipment, just as Steve takes his turn cooking on the grill or in Dutch ovens.

The ranch-vacation enterprise is simply another opportunity for these two to do what they do best.

The Heart of Russell Country

The Skelton Ranch lies in the heart of what’s touted as Montana’s “Russell Country,” named for cowboy artist Charles Russell, whose work a century ago captured the area and its inhabitants. (For more information on Russell’s work, on the Web go to russell.visitmt.com.) The ranch, located only 60 miles south of Glacier National Park, is on the Rocky Mountains’ front range, which continues 150 miles northward into Canada.

Wildlife is plentiful on the ranch, which is home to pheasant, porcupine, bobcat,

deer, elk and what's reported to be the largest concentration of grizzly bears in the lower 48 states. As many as 700 elk from the nearby Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area herd have been videocaptured roaming the ranch.

Elk are hard on fencing, but grizzly bears can be aggressive when leaving their dens each spring, forcing area ranchers to stay vigilant when cows are calving. That's why Skelton cattle calve at the family's "lower place," about 30 miles from the riding-vacation area and where the family and their cattle reside much of the year.

"Alison and the kids move back to the lower place, which is more accessible to the school bus, and I'm here a lot by myself in the fall," Steve says. "They come here weekends, or I go there. It's a bit of the gypsy life then."

The Skeltons don't offer any hunts, primarily because ranch game is so migratory that it's difficult to predict exactly where it'll be—on or off ranch property.

"We can outfit on our own ranch, but the minute we step off it, we must have all the appropriate licensing," Steve points out.

In addition to the contemporary wildlife viewing and photography opportunities on Skelton range, ample evidence of cons-old wildlife there and throughout the area is a real draw for paleontologists. The remains of two dinosaurs have been removed from the ranch, which scientists think was a breeding ground, according to Alison. Altogether, nine dinosaur sites have been identified but have yet to be dug.

In the pasture, Steve points to the visible large ends of dinosaur bones entombed in a nearby rock. Above the fossilized bones, someone, presumably a mountain man, had carved his initials and the year—1826.

Salvaging Area History

Alison and Steve describe their ranch as "a work in progress." They're continually

repurposing old structures and building new ones, including the construction of another guest cabin that will augment the present cabin, which sleeps five.

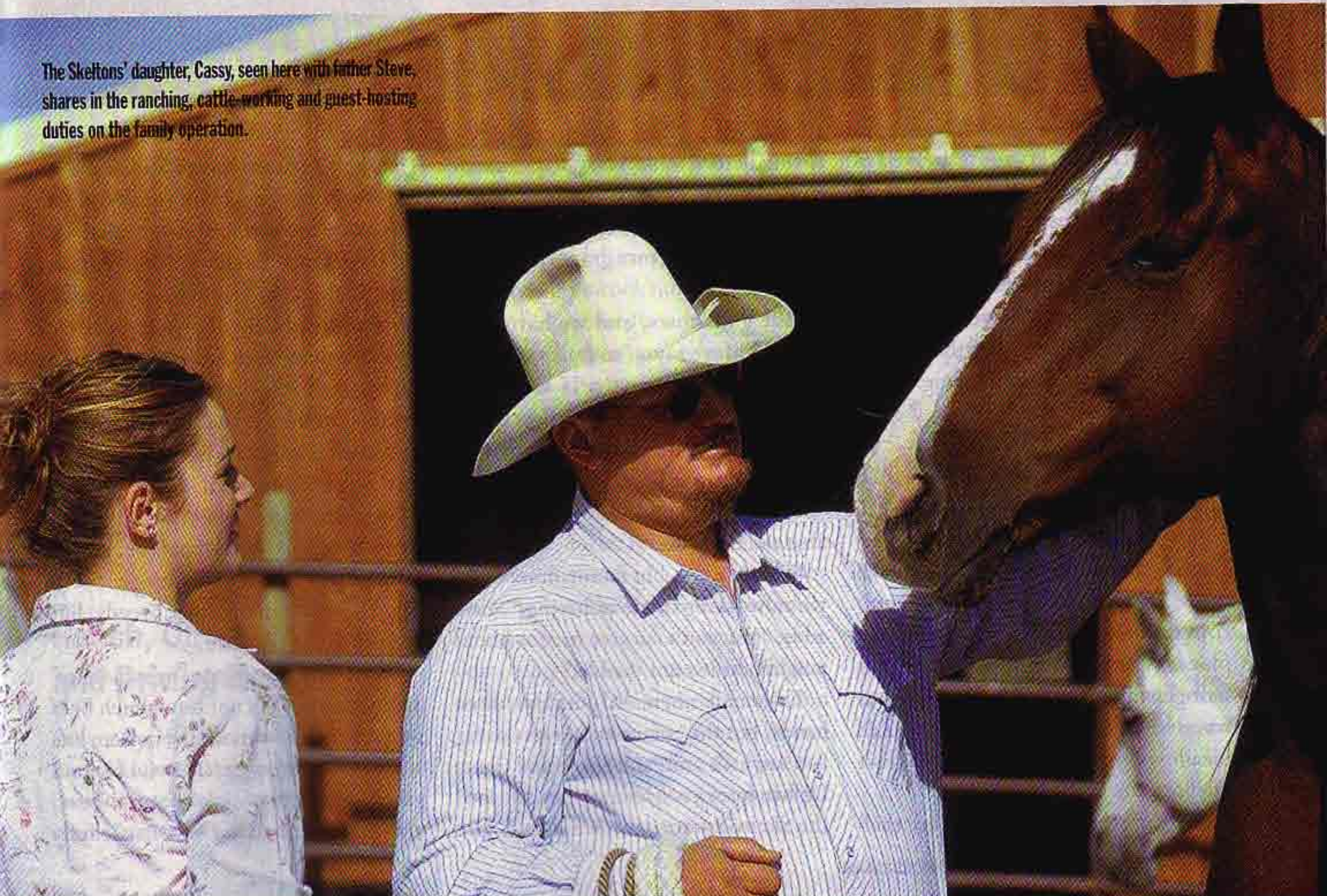
Part of their home, for example, was the old Harmony Schoolhouse, built in 1910 to replace the nearby Pine Ridge School that burned. The schoolhouse flagpole still rises from the steeple. The old teachers residence, which is unsalvageable, is nearby, as is a vintage Sears-Roebuck modular home, which is being rebuilt into a bunkhouse.

"This place went from a big cattle ranch to a big sheep ranch in the 1920s, and then back to cattle," Steve says. "They moved in the buildings during the sheep days because they needed more crew then."

The horse barn, built in 1917, had a huge sheep shed at one end, where a catch pen is now. The old wood was used in the redesigned barn, as well as for ranch house furnishings.

Alison and Steve first leased the ranch in the 1990s, then purchased it

The Skeltons' daughter, Cassy, seen here with father Steve, shares in the ranching, cattle-working and guest-hosting duties on the family operation.





Steve Skelton (left) discusses the day's gather with neighbor Shane Dellwo, who knows the Skelton outfit almost as well as he knows his home ranch.

in 2001. Their first guests arrived in 1999 and stayed on the lower place, which meant trailering horses and people between the two outfits. At the time, the upper ranch facilities were “just falling down,” as Steve describes it, and the family already had hauled away “60-something truckloads of junk.”

A Cold Trail Drive and a Last-Ditch Stronghold

The Skeltons ultimately plan to make the 8,500-acre upper place their year-round home. The 6,500-acre lower place, with its calving facilities, has more farming and dry-land alfalfa, but some hay is baled on the upper ranch meadows, which are about 5,300 feet in elevation.

Steve moves to the upper place each

spring before school is out, primarily to repair fences, and cattle come to the higher ground in June. Calves are shipped in October, but cows graze there until January.

“We get snows, and we have Chinooks,” Steve says, “so it can go from 20 below with snow to 55 above and windy. Then, in January, we do a three-day, very cold trail drive from here to the lower place.”

That’s when good neighbors are valuable assets.

“That’s a big, big factor here when we’re working cattle or haying,” Steve adds. “You can’t survive here without neighbors; it’s not doable.”

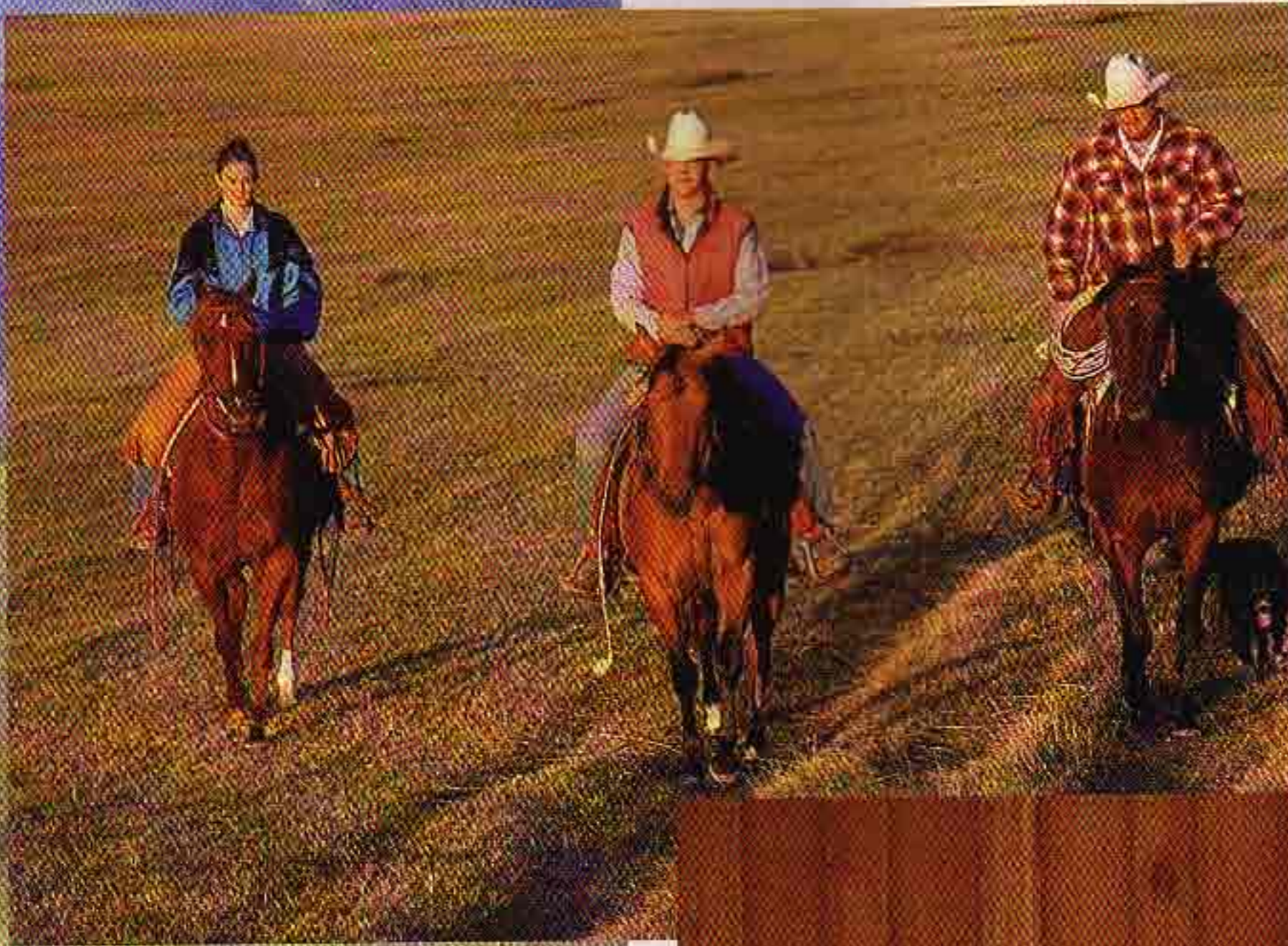
The ranch normally employs three hands, but the count was down during last August’s visit, and Shane and Chase Dellwo from a neighboring ranch helped the Skeltons move cattle and bale hay.

The Skeltons’ daughter, Cassy, age 17, and son Matt, age 15, are equally adept at ranch work and hosting guests.

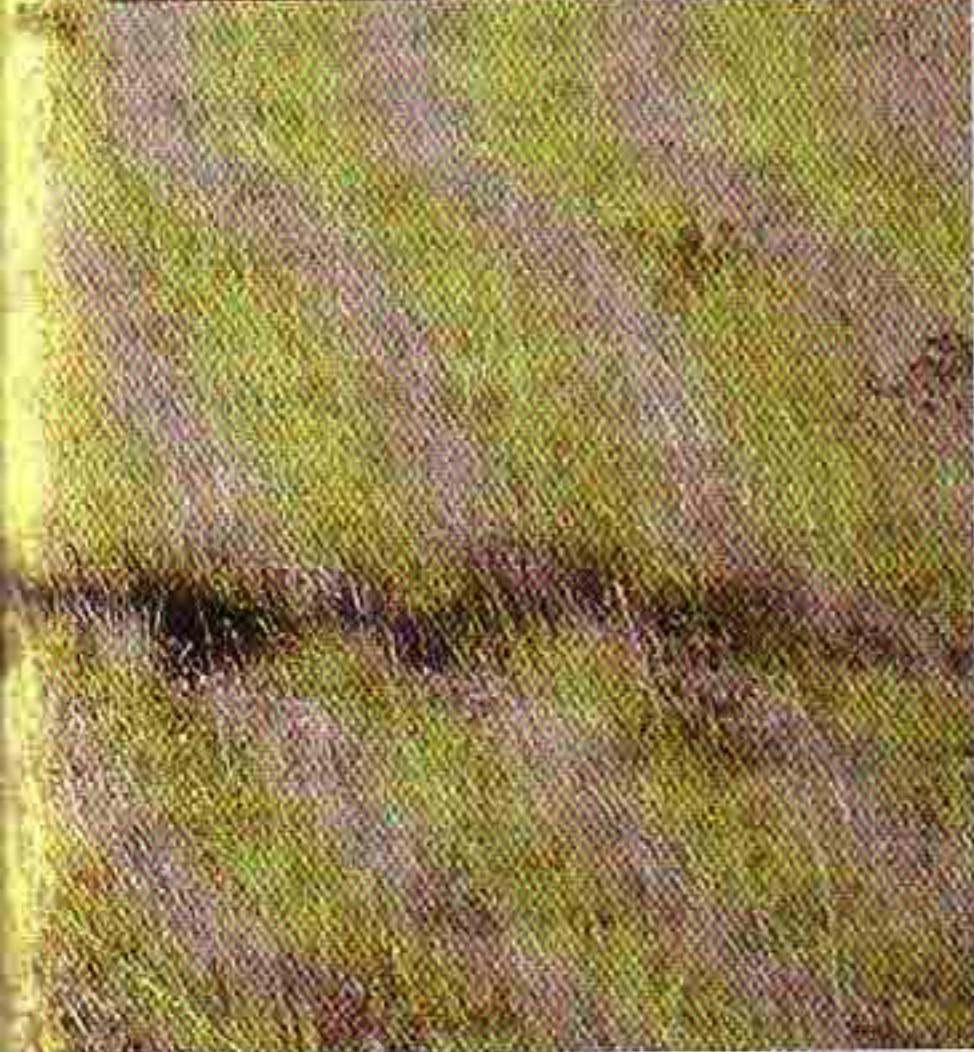
“These ranch kids know how to work, how to think and figure out things,” Alison says of the young people. “We couldn’t do this without them.”

Long-term drought has forced the Skeltons to cut their cow numbers back to 450 head. The herd base is foundation-bred Angus from eastern Maryland’s Wye River area, and the beefy, mid-sized, long-lived, extremely maternal cows flourish on the Montana range. Steve has crossed them on other breeds, but prefers the Wye cattle.

“Input costs have slapped us in the face,” Steve admits. “It’s not how much beef we grow, but how much the bottom line is. We now know cattle need certain genetics for the popular natural-beef, grass-fed market, and Wye cattle fully



Left: Riding in open country, as Cassy Skelton, Shane Dellwo and Steve Skelton routinely do while gathering cattle, appeals to ranch guests, who seldom have traveled cross-country over such an expanse. Below: The Skelton family—Cassy, Alison, Steve and Matt—own and operate Skelton Angus Ranch and SK Ranch Vacations.



fit the bill. They're designed for grazing."

And they graze the best grasses the West has to offer—"a last-ditch stronghold on the Rocky Mountain front," Steve says.

"This area is pretty much weed-free range, and ranchers have done a good job of holding it that way. Except for a few fences and a ranch house here or there, the land's much as it was long, long ago. Now, environmental groups are trying to preserve the land, and if it's ever sold and subdivided, will people coming here bring in the weeds?"

Ranch, Guest and Driving Horses

Presently, the Skeltons raise working ranch horses but have purchased the current guest horse string, which Steve says is "almost 100 percent older, really

solid, ranch geldings, as well." As each ranch-raised crop matures, some working stock will retire to join the guest string.

As for bloodlines, Steve is a self-described "Hancock nut." John Balkenbush of Sunshine Ranch is a Conrad, Montana horseman and horsemanship mentor to Steve. Balkenbush has some of the oldest Hancock lines in America, which Steve has used, as well as a Sun Frost-bred stallion.

In recent years, the Skeltons have run only a half-dozen broodmares, in part because ranch rebuilding took priority over the broodmare band. The family raised colt crops each of the past seven years using the mares they had. Among them are an Old Sorrel-bred foundation mare and a double-bred Poco Bueno mare, who crosses best on the Hancock line. She's not for sale, nor are her daughters, because all have the willing, train-

able mind Steve prefers. Otherwise, he says, "There's not a lot of pizzazz and hurrah to the horse herd, just the important things—good minds, feet and bone."

Those are necessary attributes in Montana's big country, where a day's ride gathering cattle might cover 20 to 30 miles. Despite such distances, Steve doesn't want a "16-hand nosebleed" ride, but prefers a 15- to 15.1-hand, 1,200-pound horse with cow sense.

"Nobody follows you around here with a trailer to give you a fresh horse," he says. "You better be riding something that can get the job done when you leave the barn."

"I won't say we have a really revved-up horse program, but we've put together a really good band of horses for us and our guests to ride."

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replace and add broodmares until he has 15 head. He might even add a bit of "flash and dash" to his breeding program.

"Bloodlines are important, but sometimes we put so much emphasis on those that we forget to look at the horse—the action, feet and bones," Steve says. "I want to raise that really rock-solid ranch horse everyone wants, but can't find, and we can do that here. By the time our horses are 7 or 8 years old, they have a lot of miles, experience and cow work."

In addition to ranch horses and the guest string, the Skeltons also have a Belgian team.

"I love training the big draft horses," Steve admits, "and we ride them, too. I even took two draft colts to ride in a horsemanship clinic."

Steve is currently restoring a chuck wagon that will be pulled by the Belgians. This traditional kitchen-on-wheels should prove popular with guests who already enjoy the family's Dutch-oven cooking, but the team has an even more practical purpose—hauling feed to cattle

throughout this and coming winters.

Some old-time ways still make sense to, and hold boundless appeal for, the Montana rancher.

Practical Horsemanship

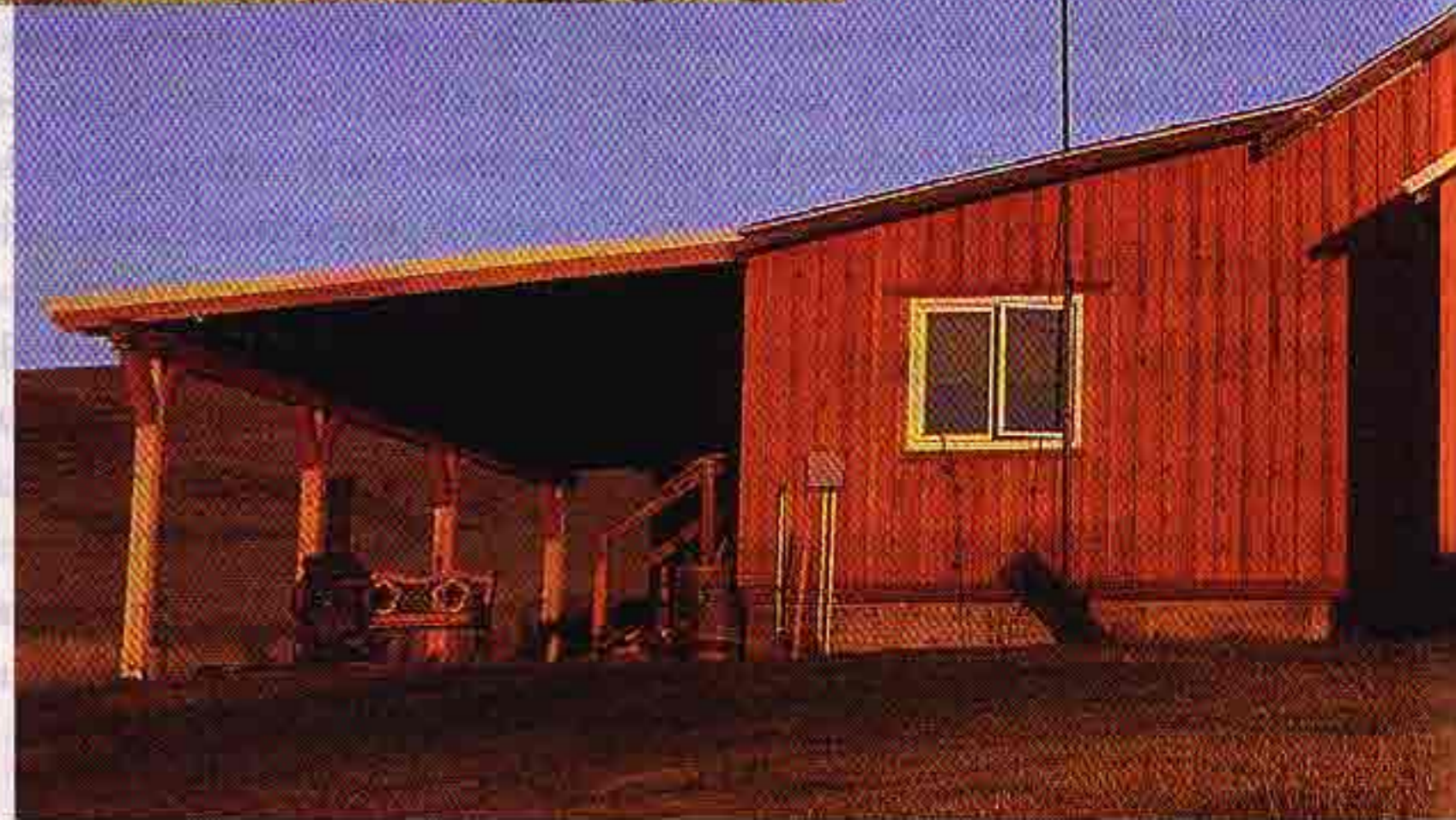
Guests begin arriving in June and, armed with items on a recommended clothing list, come as late as October. A few guests bring their own horses, but most ride ranch stock.

Small groups allow for plenty of personal interaction between the host family and their guests, as well as for more hands-on ranch and horsemanship experiences. A journeyman farrier who once worked on dude ranches and in the outfitting business, Steve appreciates the more personal rapport developed with ranch guests, as does Alison.

"We always have a wonderful exchange about how we make our living with cattle and horses, how to care for them and what the land can do," she says. "That existence is so foreign to some of our guests."

Yet, most jump right into the ranch routine, some more so than others.

"If they want to help—great," Steve says. "If not, we might go to Glacier



hat day, but the ranch work also
e done.”

ne guests are novice riders, but
own horses and ride at home.
s are involved in different segments
livestock industry, such as the Iowa
and feedlot owners who visited
ch for a closer look at the ranching
the cattle industry. They left with
r understanding of Montana range
coming into their lots.

mpetitive team roper left the Skelton
with a real appreciation for ranch-
y work. He also vowed to stick with
oping, rather than risk life and limb
on the open range.

t guests want to work cattle because
ever have.

drawn so many diagrams that Alison
e to quit writing on the barn walls,”
ays. “I try to teach guests how horses
s see, what happens when a person
oo far up a cow’s shoulder, how to
herd string out, all that.”

for many, the ranch provides an
unity to experience the practical
tion of many of the horsemanship
and maneuvers they’ve used only in
a.

imate 60 percent of our guests
here for that,” Steve comments.
than anything, they want the real
ad bolts of how to use and apply

their riding skills on the range. Their
arena skills might be way up, but they
ride out of that arena into an entirely dif-
ferent environment here, and we help
them through that change.”

Steve’s just the man to do that. He’s
conducted horsemanship clinics in the
area and attends clinics each year to
polish his own skills. He was first exposed
to Ray Hunt’s work while attending
Montana State University’s farrier school
with Hunt’s stepson, Preston Lord. But
only several years later did a particu-
larly difficult horse help Steve value
what’s now known as natural horse-
manship. Steve’s mentor, Balkenbush,
a Hunt student and a Buck Brannaman
protégé, has helped Steve along the way,
as has clinician Bryan Neubert.

“This whole horse thing has really trans-
formed me,” Steve admits. “Growing up,
it was rope ‘em, snub ‘em up and drag
‘em around with a big gelding until a horse
was halter-broke, and you knew you were
going to buck out colts every morning.

“I don’t ever want to go back to that,”
he continues. “Even though we somehow
turned out some nice horses, it was hell
on people and hell on horses. This nat-
ural horsemanship is awesome. Think of
it—as much as we soak in, the horses
are getting something they can under-
stand, too, so everybody’s happy.”

Such techniques have taken some of
the ups and downs out of horse training
for Steve, just as having guests on the
Skelton outfit has helped level ranching’s
economic highs and lows.

“Having guests on the ranch does help
balance out things and definitely com-
plements the grass and cattle financially,”
Alison says. “But it will never be about
large groups of people here. What’s most
important is the enjoyment Steve and I
share with our guests.”

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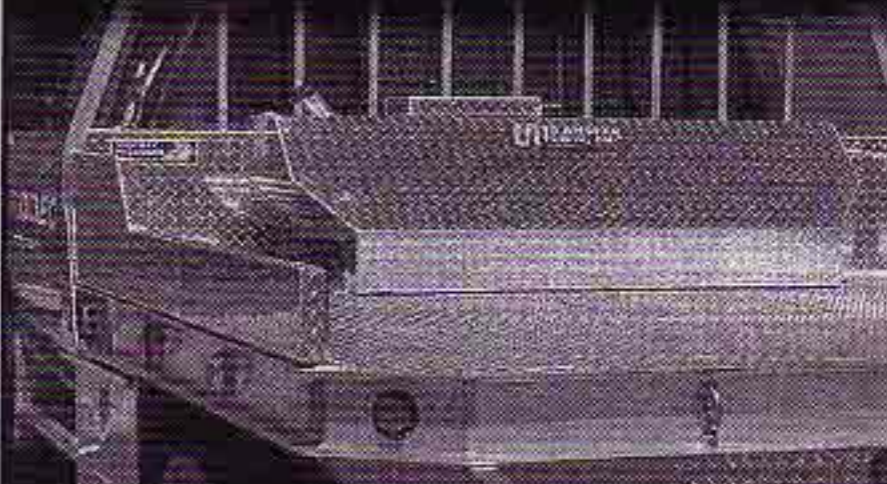
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The Harmony Schoolhouse, built in 1910, has been incorporated into the Skelton ranch house. The ranch house front door is the former entry to the school, and the old flagpole still rises above the roof.